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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 07 DUSHANBE 000858

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EUR/RUS, NEA, DRL, INL, S/P, EB, ECA  
NSC FOR MILLARD, MERKEL

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SUBJECT: SCA A/S BOUCHER, NSC SENIOR DIRECTOR MILLARD ESTABLISH SOLID  
RAPPORT WITH TAJIKISTAN'S PRESIDENT RAHMONOV

CLASSIFIED BY: Richard E. Hoagland, Ambassador, EXEC, Embassy  
Dushanbe.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher and National Security Council Senior Adviser Elisabeth Millard met with President Emomali Rahmonov for nearly two hours on May 8 to discuss strengthening cooperation between Tajikistan and the United States in regional integration and infrastructure development, border security, and democratic reform. Rahmonov emphasized the need for increased regional cooperation, specifically greater integration of Afghanistan, but pointed out with Karimov in power Uzbekistan remains a hindrance to the process. He asked for greater U.S. involvement, particularly on hydropower projects, counter-narcotics, and border security. Rahmonov explained Tajikistan's relationship with Iran is purely commercial and advocated a diplomatic solution to the current uranium-enrichment crisis. Rahmonov reassured Boucher his "firm position" is that the upcoming November presidential election be fair, transparent, and meet international standards. He asked for U.S. assistance in debt relief and for an increase in U.S. educational exchange programs for Tajik students.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY CONTINUED: Although the meeting did not necessarily break new ground, it was especially useful at this time because it reconfirmed U.S. high-level commitment and views

in the key areas of vital interest to the bilateral relationship and policy for the larger region: security issues, regional energy and infrastructure development, and the need to continue democratic evolution and to conduct a fair presidential election that meets international standards. Embassy Dushanbe would warmly welcome more such visits by Ambassador Boucher and other high-level U.S. officials at any time. END SUMMARY

#### SPONTANEOUS APPLAUSE FOR THE UNITED STATES

¶3. (C) Assistant Secretary Boucher told Rahmonov he was in Dushanbe to advance the U.S.-Tajik relationship and to continue conversations Rahmonov has had with Secretary Rice and other senior U.S. officials. He emphasized the United States wants to help Tajikistan further strengthen its security, sovereignty, and independence; enlarge its choices in the region; and promote regional cooperation, including through the export of electricity and other infrastructure projects.

¶4. (C) Rahmonov responded that further developing the U.S.-Tajik relationship and achieving concrete results is a priority in his foreign policy. He recounted that in his annual speech to Parliament on April 20, he had praised Tajikistan's bilateral relationship with the United States as his government's most important historical achievement. He reminded his guests that when he had noted the dollar amount of U.S. assistance to Tajikistan in the past three years, the members of Parliament had spontaneously applauded, the only applause during the foreign-policy part of his speech. Rahmonov said he wants continued cooperation with the United States and strengthened mutual efforts to combat narcotics, terrorism, and extremism. He stressed the importance of developing good regional relations, particularly by integrating Afghanistan into the region. He would like increased economic cooperation with the

DUSHANBE 00000858 002 OF 007

United States, especially in hydropower and energy, and said he is working with other countries in the region to promote a favorable investment climate. He thanked Boucher for mentioning these issues in his recent speeches and testimony to Congress, indicating he was familiar with (or at least had been well briefed on) the U.S. texts.

#### "REGIONAL COOPERATION IS LIKE OXYGEN"

¶5. (C) Rahmonov said he firmly promotes regional cooperation, despite some obstreperous players. The key is to integrate Afghanistan. He asserted, "Regional cooperation is like oxygen for Tajikistan!" He suggested Tajikistan's hydropower and mineral resources should interest not just other regional players but also South Asians. He said the key is to involve Russia, China, Kazakhstan, and others in this development, and added, "The United States cannot stand aside from this." He vowed to continue economic reforms to attract more Western investors, and expressed appreciation for U.S. efforts to create a regional electricity market. He praised the U.S.-funded Pyanzh Bridge project as a "symbol of common values and interests, and a powerful signal to investors."

#### INTEGRATING INFRASTRUCTURE, ENHANCING SOVEREIGNTY

¶6. (S) Rahmonov pointed out Tajikistan currently has to depend on the good will of difficult neighbors to get its exports to world markets. The only way to export its annual 400,000 tons of cotton and 400,000 tons of aluminum is by rail "10,000 km through 10 countries" to reach the Baltic ports, dependent on political whims in Uzbekistan and Russia. He asked, "How can we speak as equals with Russia when they can block our export life-line at any moment?"

¶7. (C) Rahmonov added that during his meetings May 4-6 with President Nazarbayev in Astana, the Kazakhs announced the creation of a "green corridor" to increase the trade of fruit and vegetables between Kazakhstan and Tajikistan via air. Rahmonov said he also advocated to Nazarbayev Kazakhstan's participation in re-constructing the \$62 million road from Osh

(Kyrgyzstan) to Dushanbe.

18. (C) The Assistant Secretary confirmed the United States wants to help Tajikistan develop its infrastructure, noting U.S. participation is not a competition with other players. Tajikistan should welcome many investors. "Multiple opportunities give you multiple choices." Boucher added that the less Tajikistan relies on one country or company, the more will be accomplished. He stated the United States supports the efforts of the U.S. energy company AES to become involved in regional energy infrastructure, and would appreciate Rahmonov's support for this effort.

"CRUEL-MINDED KARIMOV CANNOT BE TRUSTED"

19. (S) Rahmonov noted in its 15-year history Tajikistan has cooperated productively with all of its neighbors and, indeed, with every other country in the world, except for "dictatorially domineering Uzbekistan" - and that is because of Uzbek President Karimov. Rahmonov said he views Uzbekistan, not Afghanistan, as the biggest threat to Tajikistan's security. He stated, "While Karimov is in power, full regional cooperation is not possible."

DUSHANBE 00000858 003 OF 007

110. (C) To illustrate Uzbekistan's malign attitude toward its neighbors, Rahmonov cited Uzbekistan's difficult relations with its neighbors Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, despite having joined the Eurasian Economic Community, and Tashkent's restrictive visa regime that makes it difficult for Tajiks and Uzbeks to cross their common border. As before, he also cited Uzbek landmines on their common border. He noted in the past year these landmines have killed 70 Tajiks and wounded 200 more. He said, "All were civilians, simple people, mostly women and children, not the terrorists and drug-traffickers Karimov claims are his targets."

111. (S) Rahmonov said flatly, "Karimov is cruel-minded. He will never forgive Kyrgyz President Bakiev for permitting 500 Uzbek refugees to enter Kyrgyzstan after the May 2005 events in Andijon."

112. (C) The Assistant Secretary admitted that Uzbekistan indeed is very troubling, not just because of its internal problems, but also because it is closing itself off from everyone else in the region. He noted new plans for roads and electricity transmission in the region have "crooked lines" to work around Uzbekistan. He said we would welcome Tashkent's participation in regional cooperation and integration, but they aren't playing at this time. Although the door needs to be kept open for the future, we cannot wait and allow Uzbekistan to hold back progress in the region.

113. (S) Later in the conversation, Rahmonov, more relaxed and colloquial, returned to the issue of international and regional cooperation. He mused, "It's not easy being a small country when the big countries have us by the throat sometimes. And look at the post-Soviet countries - the neighbors celebrate and drink champagne if you have problems. Honestly, this region is worse than the Balkans. The region has thousands of problems, and everyone is working against each other. And Karimov is the worst. He once said Uzbekistan is the very best friend of the United States, but now look where he stands. But he doesn't stand 'alone.' He has 'new friends' because of his 2007 election. We do not trust Karimov. While he's in power, there's no hope for regional cooperation."

"REDUCE AFGHAN DRUGS? BUILD DOSTI ZHUM"

114. (C) Rahmonov averred the main threat from Afghanistan is narcotics. Each interested country and internal donor has its own bilateral agreements with Afghanistan, but no unified plan exists, in Rahmonov's view. He identified the root of the problem as impoverished Afghan farmers who have no other economic choice but to grow opium. He recounted when he visited Afghan Badakhshan and saw opium-poppy fields, he asked the

farmers, "Why are you growing this poison?" They responded if they grew wheat, they couldn't afford to buy food and clothes for their families, send their children to school, and pay the extortionist taxes warlords demand. With the income from opium, they can lead decent lives.

¶15. (C) Rahmonov, as he has before, strongly recommended the United States lead the effort to build Dasti Zhum dam on the Pyanzh River between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. He repeated estimates that Dasti Zhum would irrigate 1.5 million hectares of Afghan land and support 3.5 million Afghans to grow profitable alternative crops, not to mention the benefits to creating small

DUSHANBE 00000858 004 OF 007

businesses and industries.

#### BORDER SECURITY EQUALS REGIONAL STABILITY

¶16. (C) Turning to the related issue of border security, Rahmonov deemed it essential for stability in the region. He asked Boucher to take note that Tajikistan had removed the Russians from the border to increase Tajikistan's sovereignty. He asked rhetorically, "Do you think that was easy?" He noted Tajik Border Guards are on the front line curtailing the supply of drugs from Afghanistan through Central Asia and Russia to Europe. Rahmonov thanked the United States for essential assistance to Tajikistan's border guards, but said the troops frankly need more. Additionally, he advocated the EU should work to build border-guard capacity on the Afghan side of the common border.

¶17. (C) Recounting his experience of rebuilding Tajikistan after its civil war, Rahmonov said he understands what is going on in Afghanistan and sees Karzai needs more support. Rahmonov also commented, "Karzai needs to be a little stronger."

¶18. (C) The Assistant Secretary expressed U.S. admiration for the Tajik Border Guards' control of the border. He said the United States is glad to help, and will seriously look at what more we can do.

IRAN: "INVESTMENT, DA; IDEOLOGY, NYET"

¶19. (C) Because the Iraq war continues, Rahmonov stated, new instability in Iran would not be in the region's best interest. He said he fears that escalating tension between Iran and the West might create problems for Central Asia by inciting and strengthening radical clerics and religious extremists. He advocated a peaceful resolution to the current crisis through political and diplomatic means. Such a resolution, he judged, would raise the United States' status with Islamic countries.

¶20. (S) Rahmonov recalled his visit to Tehran in January when he asked President Ahmadinejad, at the request of the United States, to work toward an internationally acceptable diplomatic resolution. Rahmonov mused, "Ahmadinejad is not Khatami." Khatami had been businesslike and pragmatic, but "Ahmadinejad is a toy in the hands of the radical clerics."

¶21. (C) Rahmonov alluded to Tajikistan's vigilance against Iran's extremist ideology, but said frankly he had allowed Iran to invest in the Sangtuda-2 hydropower station and Anzob tunnel because no other country was willing to cough up the money at the time.

¶22. (S) Almost as a footnote, but pointedly, Rahmonov alleged Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party is funded and influenced by Iran.

¶23. (C) The Assistant Secretary assured Rahmonov the United States is working hard for a diplomatic resolution to the current international crisis with Iran, but he also pointed out Tehran has been interfering in Iraq and the Middle East peace process and continues to support international terrorism. The Assistant Secretary said we understand Tajikistan's interests in Iranian investment in Tajikistan's infrastructure, but he asked

that Rahmonov help us where he can with Iran and relay

DUSHANBE 00000858 005 OF 007

information on Iranian activity in Central Asia.

RAHMONOV SAYS NOVEMBER PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION WILL BE FAIR AND  
TRANSPARENT

¶24. (C) The Assistant Secretary suggested Rahmonov appears to have genuine popular support and would most likely win a free election. His reputation and Tajikistan's status in the international community would be enhanced if he ran a fair and transparent election that meets international standards. He urged Rahmonov to work closely with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and other well-wishers.

¶25. (C) Rahmonov initially postured that he has not decided to run again, but then relaxed and joked that it has been on his mind. Turning more serious, he assured the Assistant Secretary his "firm position" is to conduct a free and transparent election in a democratic manner. In his recent speech to parliament, he reminded, he had noted Tajikistan has all the conditions and experience needed to conduct an election according to international standards, and he had called on all political parties and local authorities to follow election laws and not violate international standards.

¶26. (C) He noted with a bit of pride, he, unlike Nazarbayev and Niyazov, had "never studied in the politburo school" but "comes from the people." He asserted he knows the value of stability and peace. As he often does for high-level visitors, Rahmonov recounted how he was plucked out of the national assembly during the darkest early days of the civil war - when it was meeting in Khujand because the Islamists had captured the parliament building in Dushanbe - and was plunked down at a table with a blank sheet of paper and a pencil and told "to create a government" when the country had no constitution, no military, no flag, no national anthem, and all the banks had been looted bare. He briefly summarized that he subsequently had repatriated nearly one million Tajik refugees, some from as far away as Belarus, and had integrated the competing "mujahidin" into a new national army. He mused that when he now speaks in Parliament, "It's like looking into a mirror. I see the former President of Tajikistan and all the warlords who once wanted to kill each other. Now they're colleagues in a democratic process."

¶27. (C) Rahmonov noted Tajikistan now has nearly 3,000 registered NGOs, more than 22 private radio and television stations, hundreds [sic] of newspapers, and eight legally registered political parties. Rahmonov suggested this is not a bad start for a young country.

¶28. (C) Noting that democracy is an evolutionary process requiring continual adjustments and improvements, Boucher stressed two key improvements for the November election that would further promote democracy in Tajikistan. Political parties and candidates need access to media to get their views out for open discussion. Currently, political parties are permitted only 15 minutes on-air time during the two months before an election. Media access for politicians and parties means they should receive access on state media, or the government should allow truly independent electronic media stations to register and operate.

¶29. (C) Boucher also requested President Rahmonov assist in

DUSHANBE 00000858 006 OF 007

registering National Democratic Institute and Internews. "I would appreciate anything you can do to normalize their situations." He added he was pleased to hear Rahmonov's commitment to improving the democratic process, and he again reminded the President NGOs have an important role to play. "Tajikistan can set an example on this issue."



DEBT RELIEF: "SYMBOLIC, YES, BUT IMPORTANT"

¶30. (C) Rahmonov praised the G-8 for its initiative to write off poor countries' debts. He noted debt relief would promote further economic reform, and that Tajikistan would use the freed-up funds for social investment. He recalled the IMF has already canceled Tajikistan's debt, in the HIPC framework, and hopes the World Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development will follow suit.

¶31. (C) Rahmonov asked that the Assistant Secretary urge the U.S. government to forgive Tajikistan's \$18 million bilateral debt to the U.S. Commodity Credit Corporation for humanitarian assistance during the civil war and in the following period of instability. He said \$18 million is admittedly a small amount, but forgiveness of this debt would be a powerful symbolic gesture of belief in the reformist direction Tajikistan has chosen. He hinted such forgiveness could strengthen Dushanbe's hand with Moscow. The Assistant Secretary said he needs to study the issue further and promised to look it.

"PLEASE GIVE US MORE EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES"

¶32. (SBU) Rahmonov requested the United States increase the number of slots for Tajik students to study in the United States. He said firmly, "It would only benefit Tajikistan and the United States to have more Tajiks in American universities."

Ambassador Boucher fully agreed with the concept, and said he would do what he could to convince the U.S. Congress to allocate more money for this worthy purpose.

COMMENT

¶33. (C) During informal parting remarks, Rahmonov said warmly he was pleased with the conversation, and his relaxed, cordial body language confirmed his assessment, as did Foreign Policy Adviser Rahmatulloyev to the Ambassador in a phone call the following day. Further, the official Tajik press release of the meeting was unusually accurate and "un-spun." Although the meeting did not necessarily break new ground, it was especially useful at this time because it reconfirmed U.S. high-level commitment and views in the key areas of vital interest to the bilateral relationship: security issues, regional energy and infrastructure development, and the need to continue democratic evolution and to conduct a fair presidential election that meets international standards. Rahmonov highly values respect and "objectivity." He doesn't like high-handed demands and table pounding. The Assistant Secretary's light touch and deep knowledge of the issues established a solid working relationship with Rahmonov. The Tajik President can be difficult, yes. No, he's not the Thomas Jefferson of Central Asia. But he's no Karimov or Niyazov by a long shot. Embassy Dushanbe would warmly welcome at any time more such visits by Ambassador Boucher and NSC Senior Director Millard and other high-level U.S. officials. END COMMENT.

DUSHANBE 00000858 007 OF 007

¶34. (U) The Assistant Secretary did not have an opportunity to clear this cable before departing Dushanbe.

HOAGLAND